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Seekership Revisited: Explaining Traffic In and Out of New Religions

Steven Sutcliffe

The phenomena of ‘seekers’ and ‘seeking’ has been widely remarked in modern religion but remains surprisingly under-theorised. This is especially the case within the study of new religions despite a tradition of scholarship stretching back into the 1950s. This paper will revisit this scholarship to recover pertinent insights and sketch a revised model of ‘seekership’. Where Lofland and Stark (1965) present the seeker as a ‘personally disoriented searcher’ literally ‘floundering about among religions’, and Richardson (1978) highlights the ‘conversion careers’ of individuals, I will argue that apparently individualistic and supposedly ‘deviant’ patterns of seeking should be rethought as a thoroughly socialised mode of thinking and acting. This is already implicit in Campbell’s model of ‘seekership’ (1972) but can be developed to identify a stable and predictable disposition rather than endorsing the unique and charismatic assertions made in primary sources. I will argue that seekership models the exposure and response by a diffuse group of practitioners to the pluralised repertoire of beliefs and practices available in modern societies.

First I examine the scholarship on seekership, tracing the dawning recognition that a ‘normal’ orientation may in fact underpin apparently fringe practices. I then explore Campbell’s conjunction of seekership with its host environment, the ‘cultic milieu’, defined as ‘the sum of unorthodox and deviant belief-systems together with their practices, institutions and personnel’ which is ‘united and identified by the existence of an ideology of seekership and by seekership institutions’ (Campbell 1972:134-135). Developing Campbell’s argument, I argue that ‘seeking’ is as much an *effect* of wider

structural conditions as their *cause*: no longer an unmediated charism, but a disposition produced within a wider milieu structured by similar patterns of thinking and acting. Seeking and host environment are thus mutually constitutive: seekership ‘both arises from and reinforces [the milieu’s] ... receptive and syncretistic orientation’ (Campbell 1972: 123).

Campbell’s model, although ‘good to think’ in Levi-Strauss’s famous adage, is brief and dated, so later I sketch the grounds for a revised model of seekership as an incipient *habitus* following Pierre Bourdieu. His interpreter, Bernard Lahire, has described *habitus* as ‘propensities to act and react in a certain way, with preferences and dislikes, ways to perceive, to think and to feel’ (cited in Rey 2007: 47). Crucial to the identification of a *habitus* is a particular disposition which in due course becomes naturalised and instinctive as the ‘obvious’ thing to think or do. Since seekers are by definition searching and hence by implication uncommitted to and/or dissatisfied with any single authority, the mark of a seekership *habitus* is simultaneous exposure to competing traditions of beliefs and practices offered by multiple authorities (Wood 2007). This predicament constitutes the modern religious field and it is reproduced in the biographical twists and turns of seekers’ careers.

Seekership as a *habitus* is particularly visible in new religions. But I will also argue that the pluralizing and relativizing effects of the multiple authorities to which seekers respond operate across the conceptual ‘religious-secular’ divide. My broader aim is to indicate how a wider mode of behaviour is spilling beyond the religious field *per se* and presenting itself as a strategy of action for a receptive demographic within workplaces, education, and lifestyle consumption more generally. In short, I argue that

seekership can not only explain the logic and structure underpinning human traffic in and out of new religions, but indicates a wider mode of behaviour beyond its incubating environment of the historical cultic milieu.

Seekers in modern cultural history

Campbell defines the activity of ‘seeking’ through a social-psychological theory of relative deprivation: a seeker is someone who has ‘adopted a problem-solving perspective while defining conventional religious institutions and beliefs as inadequate’ (1972: 123). As the leader of a local ‘new age’ meditation group told me: ‘The church dissatisfies me. I know all the things they teach. I want more, you know?’ (Sutcliffe 2003: 195). This statement expresses cognitive ‘deprivation’ in being dissatisfied with available authoritative knowledge and desiring something ‘more’ to address that discontent.

I thus treat seekership as a modern phenomenon linked to expanded awareness of cultural and religious pluralism accompanied by a reflexive and reforming consciousness of ‘self’. Although modern historical studies are rare, in the appositely titled *Restless Souls*, Leigh Eric Schmidt foregrounds the role played by seeking in forming liberal forms of ‘American spirituality’. For example, he cites Ralph Waldo Emerson’s self-depiction in 1841 as an ‘endless seeker’ and points to Rufus Jones’s influential Quaker writings on seekers and mysticism in the early twentieth century (Schmidt 2005: 228, 236). Other areas and periods of modern religion in which a discourse about ‘search’ and ‘quest’ is common would benefit from similar narrative histories, from former Theosophist G.R.S. Mead’s Quest Society, founded in London in 1909 with the motto ‘Seek, and ye shall find’, to the second edition of Rom Landau’s bestselling *God is My Adventure: A Book of*

Modern Mystics, Masters and Teachers, which describes ‘the spiritual experiences of a fellow seeker’ (Landau 1945: 7) for a growing readership.

These brief references form the tip of an iceberg of a rich and diffuse modern ‘tradition’ of seeking, which is nevertheless often overlooked when describing seekers’ biographies. Evidence for the historical and social formation of seekers is crucial to my argument that this field represents more than an aggregation of colourful and highly individualistic biographies. For example, the structure of the so-called ‘new age movement’, which I take as a prime contemporary example, cannot be fully explained without reconstructing the historical networks which produced Findhorn in Scotland in 1962 (Sutcliffe 2003) or the Shalam community, later the Universal Brotherhood, in Australia in 1963 (Carthew 2011). Not only were these two communities in communication with each other in the 1970s as part of an international discourse on the coming ‘new age’, but they have historical roots stretching back well before the 1960s countercultural matrix taken to be generative of ‘new age’ by most commentators, drawing on Rosicrucian, Theosophical, Spiritualist and UFO subcultures between the 1920s-1950s. These earlier groups supplied traditions of practice and interpretation for the later generations of practitioners, in which ‘seeker’ formed a core identity for negotiating the emergent field of multiple religious authorities. In other words, ‘new age’ groups of the 1960s and 1970s did not come out of the blue, nor were they necessarily made up of virtuosi. Rather, they socialised their subjects into a wider field of collective activity in which seeking made practical sense.

Print media of the mid-twentieth century maintained a lively discourse on seeking which served as an important resource for practitioners. For example, in 1928 a collection

of addresses on aspects of Christian spiritualism was published in London under the title *The Seekers: Talks by 'Dr. Lascelles'*. In one talk, 'Dr. Lascelles' (the medium's spirit guide) redescribes Jesus's disciples as the 'twelve seekers'. 'Dr Lascelles' explains the reach of this new form of discipleship by informing his audience that 'you are all seekers, and belong to this Society of Seekers' (Barrett 1928: 30). The implication is an ancestral genealogy stretching back to Christian origins.

Where 'Dr. Lascelles' invokes the authority of tradition, a more detraditionalised stance is described by Landau. He reasons that readers of *God is My Adventure* were people who were 'disillusioned by the Churches, [and] ... only too willing to delve into the ways and methods of unorthodox schools of thought, yet *without ... feeling compelled to accept this or that method as the only valid one*' (Landau 1945: 7; emphasis added). Significantly, Landau describes a constituency for whom 'delving' is attractive but commitment is provisional and not necessarily singular.

In other words, the post-1960s 'new age' movement was anticipated by subjects who might plausibly have read Landau's book - we know they read similar sources - and who in some cases engaged the same 'mystics, masters and teachers' whom Landau describes: for example, Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, Steiner and Krishnamurti. Landau's 'adventure' was circumscribed by the western metropolises (London, Paris, New York) in which his interviewees were located, but the quest for new authorities was extended by his fellow journalist Paul Brunton (1898-1981) beyond Europe and America in *A Search in Secret India* (Brunton 1934) and *A Search in Secret Egypt* (Brunton 1936).

These popular books describing a proto-tradition of 'seeking' meant that pioneers of the 'new age' in the UK, for example, such as Frederick Bligh Bond (1864-1945) in

Glastonbury in the 1920s (Hopkinson-Ball 2007) and Peter Caddy (1917-1994) amongst Rosicrucians in the 1930s before founding the Findhorn community (Sutcliffe 2013), could be socialised through print media into thinking about their relationship to religion in terms of a ‘search’ amongst multiple sources. And since many of these individuals were recently or indeed simultaneously involved in established traditions – especially Christian groups – seekership could form a capacity within existing identities: Bligh Bond, for example, was a member of the Church of England and Caddy was brought up in a Methodist family.

A recognised identity and latent tradition of practice thus forms a historical background to recent testimonies. For example, John Lash in *The Seeker’s Handbook: the Complete Guide to Spiritual Pathfinding* states:

Like you, I am a seeker. My quest began with dreams in early childhood, followed in my teens by ... inner experiences ... Quite soon I was led to worldwide travels and ... spontaneous mystical experiences, followed up by years of esoteric studies and various disciplines of self-work. It is a quest that still continues (Lash 1990: xi).

Lash’s address recalls Landau in grounding seeking in the exploration of personal experience in the face of multiple authorities. Campbell’s twin conditions of seeking - a ‘problem-solving perspective’ plus the ‘inadequacy’ of any single authority – shape these appeals to ‘fellow seekers’ published in different continents fifty years apart.

Although evidence of seeking can be identified in a range of modern religious traditions¹, ‘new age’ networks offer particularly strong examples. Between 1995 and 1998 three series of *Desperately Seeking Something*, a programme exploring ‘alternative’

beliefs and practices, were broadcast by the British television station Channel 4. An accompanying leaflet captured the series' popular pitch for 'spiritual seeking':

What is the truth about our existence and how should we lead our lives? ... As the year 2000 approaches, some *seekers after truth – dissatisfied* with traditional religions and *not willing* to settle for materialism or nihilism – have started on *different paths*, looking for something that will *work* for them. On the whole, they do not want to follow *any particular system*, but they do have certain approaches in common (Channel 4 1995: 5; emphasis added).

The combination of problem-solving perspective and inadequacy of a single solution recur here, now joined by a practical emphasis on what 'works'. For example, the American activist David Spangler (b. 1945), advised readers of *Pilgrim in Aquarius* to '*do some sampling* of ideas and images' (Spangler 1996: 181; emphasis added) and the English writer, William Bloom (b.1948), urged readers of the Findhorn magazine *One Earth* to '*do something, anything*, to deepen your relationship with the sacred' (Bloom 1993: 18; emphasis added). 'We're all searching for something, aren't we?', I was told by a hitchhiker to Findhorn (Sutcliffe 2003: 1). The range of practices available to support this 'search' is glimpsed in my own career as a seeker in Edinburgh in the 1980s:

I became a vegetarian and lived in a co-operative household where a lively 'alternative' culture unfolded, incorporating sexual politics (feminist and anti-sexist men's groups) and a wholefoods co-op ... Between 1983 and 1986, in no particular order, I read popular accounts of Buddhism and Taoism, consulted the *I Ching*, learnt to read Tarot cards ... had my astrological birthchart prepared ... practised Zen meditation and struggled with T'ai Chi (Sutcliffe 2003: 2).

By the early 1990s ‘teach yourself’² catalogues of beliefs and practices were being published, such as Lash’s *Seeker’s Handbook* in the USA and *The Seeker’s Guide: A New Age Resource Book* (Button and Bloom 1992) in the UK. Autobiographies and memoirs in the same period indicate the diffusion of a seeker discourse within popular and celebrity cultures in which an elective affinity of seeking with consumption becomes more explicit: for example, Hollywood actress Shirley MacLaine’s *Out on a Limb* (1983), journalist Mick Brown’s *The Spiritual Tourist: a personal odyssey through the outer reaches of belief* (Brown 1998) and Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything* (Gilbert 2006) which was made into a film in 2010. Often there is a light and colloquial register in these accounts, which leads Dumit to argue that seeking can be understood as a form of ‘serious play’ which challenges the very idea of a stable and unitary quest.

In contrast to Dumit’s ‘ludic’ interpretation, other testimonies suggest disenchantment, showing that the seeker may take her quest very seriously. For example, the American scholar Jeffrey Masson’s memoir of the guru Paul Brunton is subtitled ‘a journey through spirituality and disillusion’ (Masson 1993), while former English hippie C. J. Stone muses: ‘Maybe there is a genuine spirituality. I don’t know ... I was always looking, but I never found what I was looking for’ (1996: 196).

Although experiences and interpretations may differ, there is sufficient evidence of a tradition of seeking to support a historical and sociological reevaluation of Campbell’s concept of seekership.

Drifters and deviants: the early sociology of ‘seeking’

Seeking first seems to have been identified as a significant variable in the 1950s in Alberta, Canada, when Mann (1962 [1955]: 39-41) identified a small population of practitioners operating on the fringes of the churches. He rather pejoratively calls these people ‘metaphysical tramps’ and sees them as ‘intellectual critics of the churches’ who are ‘eager to discover some new slant on religion’. These ‘tramps’ were typically single, unattached and geographically mobile; Mann describes them as ‘incorrigible drifters’. Despite his dismissive tone, a useful correlation is established between geographical mobility, lower patterns of church attendance, and ‘metaphysical’ curiosity. Representing a similar period and demography in the northern US, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* (Festinger *et al* 1964 [1956]) featured a group whom the authors dubbed ‘The Seekers’. Participants gathered under the authority of a ‘Mrs Keech’ (Dorothy Martin, 1900-1992) to learn through small group discussion. This format encouraged face-to-face interaction and intimate sharing of views under the watchful eye of an authoritative leader, anticipating the small group structure of the ‘new age’ movement (Sutcliffe 2003: chap. 3), and also, from the 1960s onwards, developments in mainstream religious and therapeutic institutions (Wuthnow 1994).

In the 1960s, Lofland (1977[1966]) differentiated between ‘veteran’ and ‘freshmen’ seekers in the Unification Church mission in California: the former were typically aged over forty, born in the interwar period or earlier, the latter implicitly belonged to the post-war ‘baby boom’ generation. Also in the US, and like ‘The Seekers’, exploring space craft and science fiction cosmology, Bucknor (1968) identified a type amongst UFO groups whom he called ‘the occult seeker’. Like Festinger and Lofland,

Bucknor implicitly presents the behaviour of ‘seeking’ as a collective rather than individualistic phenomenon even if he continues to pathologise it. However, whereas core group is relatively stable in Festinger and Lofland, Bucknor portrays a more floating audience of seekers with relatively high turnover.

Although alluding to the effects of socialisation and organisation beneath the morphology of aggregated individuals, these early treatments represent seekers as confused or even ‘abnormal’. Campbell suggests that seekers ‘do not necessarily cease seeking when a revealed truth is offered to them, nor do they necessarily stop looking in other directions when one path is indicated as *the* path to truth’. He thinks this is because seekers ‘in fact have lost sight of their original aim and through the “displacement of goals” have come to accept seeking itself as the primary end’ (Campbell 1972: 127). The title of Lofland and Stark’s paper ‘Becoming a world-saver: a theory of conversion to a deviant perspective’ (1965) epitomises this conjunction of confusion with abnormality, implying that seekers’ utopian notion of ‘saving the world’ is a fool’s errand.

Seekers as rational and social agents

The assumption of social and cultural deviance was increasingly questioned in the 1970s as interest grew in ‘new religions’ and a ‘new religious consciousness’, especially in the USA (Needleman 1972, Glock and Bellah 1976) but also as a dimension of the UK counterculture (Leech 1973). The reasons are complex and include a number of factors. For members of the ‘baby boom’ generation (born between 1946 and 1962), interest in the ‘new’ might in part be a product of the ‘cultural revolution’ of the 1960s (Marwick 1998) in which tradition and deference came under attack across western societies. This critique was accompanied by the ‘coming out’ of a range of new cultural identities:

gender, sexual, ethnic and political – and now religious. In the US, a marked increase in the latter followed the rescinding of the Asian Exclusion Act in 1965. In Europe, institutional secularization was undermining the domination of the religious field by traditional Christian churches and giving new visibility to minority formations (McLeod 2007). Simultaneously the new academic field of Religious Studies fostered a liberal syllabus emphasising plurality and difference in representations of ‘religion’ historically defined by Christianity.

In fact ‘new’ religions had been a feature of the American landscape since at least the nineteenth century (Bednarowski 1989) while ‘alternative’ forms of religion - including Spiritualism and Theosophy - had long found an audience in Europe (Hanegraaff 1996: Part Three). Thus it would be more accurate to state that in the early 1970s a historical phenomenon acquired a new name and a fresh approach as a more nuanced and empathetic scholarly voice unsettled the dominant nomothetic sociology of objectifying roles and forces. A more ideographic model of social causality began to form which emphasised practitioners’ self-understandings and self-representations. Where earlier models represented seekers’ meaning and intentionality being trumped by macro social and economic forces, the new generation was more sympathetic to emic narratives which by definition rationalised and legitimated practitioners’ explanations of what they were doing, why and to what end. In this methodologically individualist reinterpretation of social action, the careers of individual ‘seekers’ moving ‘in and out’ of new religions (Richardson 1978) became salient factors to explain the success or failure of particular groups and movements. Social causality was effectively inverted as humanistic values of volition and intentionality took centre stage.

A good example is Straus' paper, 'Changing oneself: seekers and the creative transformation of life experience'. The title announces a dramatic epistemic shift in which the seeker is reenvisioned as 'acting creatively ... to construct a satisfying life' by tactically exploiting opportunities for 'life-change' (Straus 1976: 252, 253). Straus turns sociological models upside down by arguing that collectivities are mobilised and steered by their constituent members. No longer recognisable as Mann's 'incorrigible drifters', seekers are re-modelled as radical agents in charge of their own destinies.

Straus also supports my argument about the functional 'transposability' of seeking. The 'quest to change one's life' (Straus 1976: 269) was then emerging as a strong theme across traditionally sharply-differentiated fields of religion, psychotherapy, counselling, self-help and even leisure pursuits. His model of the seeker 'acting creatively' and employing 'tactics' for exploiting 'happenstance situations and encounters' (Straus 1976: 252-3) captures a wider cultural phenomenon closely bound up with choice and consumption. The consequence is that the boundary further erodes between the pursuit of supposedly 'deviant' seeking within 'cults', and 'normal' participation in a range of secular and/or other religious practices. The seeker is re-tooled as a fully rational agent 'socially oriented to the quest for personal growth' rather than the 'personally disoriented searcher' (Balch and Taylor 1977: 851) who was previously 'floundering about among religions' (Lofland and Stark 1965: 869).

The routinization of seeking: seekership as social institution

Ann Braude remarks about 'new age' spiritualities that 'it is very difficult to institutionalise a religion that persists in asking people to look within themselves for religious truth' (Braude 2004: 274). Braude helpfully points to the historical dimension of

‘looking within’, but she overcomplicates the question of its institutionalization. In fact the repeated invitation to ‘look within’ can be considered a formative cognitive activity of seekership, learnt within the networks of groups, lectures, ‘fairs’ and retreats central to the historical cultic milieu. Often small-scale and/or temporary, nevertheless these are institutions which *instruct* practitioners in *how* to ‘look within’. Braude thus misses the crucial point that ‘looking within’ is a social and historical form of behavior which is therefore less ‘difficult’ to institutionalize than she imagines.

Similarly, in ‘Socialising the Subjective’, Paul Heelas (1982) argues that the subjectivities of so-called ‘self religions’ in 1970s California were collectivised and routinised in ways which practitioners themselves did not usually avow. Heelas shows that practitioners’ testimonies are typically validated by a folk phenomenology of the potency of individual experience, reminiscent of Lash’s focus on ‘inner experiences’ and Straus’ model of ‘changing oneself’. The impact of social thought and collective structure on their practices was therefore not easily detectable: for practitioners, it was self-evident that seeking was unmediated, spontaneous and effective. But Heelas shows how the apparently subjective experiences of ‘self religions’ are subject to socialisation in the very moment of articulation. In short, Durkheimian socialisation and Weberian routinization mould seekers’ testimonies from the outset: seekership is a behavior and a role learned like any other.

Let us recap. Campbell’s concept of the cultic milieu has been influential. It has been used to describe the famously loose structure of ‘new age’, which Hanegraaff (1996: 522) suggests is ‘the cultic milieu having become conscious of itself ... as constituting a more or less unified “movement”’. It has structured empirical studies of alternative

religion and radical politics (Löow and Kaplan 2002) and been adapted by Heelas and Woodhead (2005) in their concept of the 'holistic milieu' as a key force in the 'spiritual revolution'. Campbell's model of seekership has, however, been less widely engaged. There have certainly been useful broad brush portrayals. For example, Roof (1993) describes the US 'baby boom' cohort as a 'generation of seekers'. Similarly, Wuthnow describes two ideal-types of American religious behaviour: 'dwelling and seeking', the latter embracing 'an imagery of journeys' in which 'the sacred is ... portable' (1998: 4).

Despite some popularising benefits, the danger of the broad brush portrayal is that the terminology loses analytical precision and drifts into a form of descriptivism. For example, after Campbell, the concept of seekership has largely been restricted to constructing typologies. Hence Rousseau (1998) offers a threefold typology consisting in 'wanderers', whom he describes as 'passive seekers' who 'dabble in mysticism [and] self-development'; 'group believers', marked by 'commitment to a particular group with a particular ideology [which] limits further exploration'; and 'solitary believers', who 'maintain a relatively strong commitment to their personal quest for meaning ... but ... tend to reject long term commitments' (Rousseau 1998: 79). Walliss (2002: 70-89) describes a broadly similar typology of 'users', 'drifters' and 'searchers' amongst Brahma Kumaris in the UK, and Sutcliffe (2003: 204-205) contrasts 'serial' with 'multiple' modes of seeking.

But if seekership is so pervasive, what can it achieve analytically? To put it starkly: can seekership be falsified?³ Certainly Warburg (2001: 91-93) argues that the major problem is differentiating 'seeking' from 'non-seeking', especially when the more reliable theoretical concept of 'conversion' is available (*ibid*: 91-93). Warburg's point is

well-taken. However, I am not arguing that either ‘new age’ or other formations of seeking exhaust the data for modern religion. There is a large amount of data for religious formation based in kin or ethnic ties, or in other forms of relatively stable commitment, that are demonstrably ‘non-seeking’. Warburg’s question thus arises from the underdevelopment of Campbell’s prototype analysis of the imbrication of seekership and its host environment. The identification of seeking as a regularised and falsifiable mode of thinking and acting can be empirically substantiated on the basis of the historical evidence reviewed earlier. Notwithstanding the descriptivism of some accounts, a prototype behaviour has been identified: a social institution consisting in normative beliefs and behaviour mediated by relationships which serve goals and provide status. However, the mechanisms through which seekership is inculcated and transmitted remain uncertain. To this problem I now turn.

Seekership matured: towards a *habitus* of seekership

To improve upon Campbell’s model we can adapt Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of the *habitus* to describe seekership as a capacity within a wider field of action. My approach follows the principle of Bourdieu’s ‘generative structuralism’ in not attempting to prioritise either agency (seeking) or structure (here, cultic milieu) as the sole causal mechanism in the production of seeking, but instead I see them as mutually constitutive. Bourdieu’s *habitus* is subject to dispute and has been developed by his followers with different emphases. I do not have space to explain the model in full, but I will sketch the bare bones of how it might fulfil the promise of Campbell’s model.

The word *habitus* is the Latin root of the English word ‘habit’. The Oxford English Dictionary describes this as ‘a settled disposition or tendency to act in a certain

way, especially one acquired by frequent repetition of the same act'. In brief, Bourdieu argues that a *habitus* is inculcated in a subject – for example, Landau and Lash, or participants at Shalam and Findhorn - through practical mimesis (copying) of the utterances, gestures and practices of influential others, so that these become 'second nature' and in due course are 'done' unreflectively and instinctively. The Oxford English Dictionary gives corporeal and cognitive meanings to 'habit': respectively, 'bearing, deportment, behaviour' and 'mental constitution, disposition'.

In other words a *habitus* is expressed through both 'thinking' and 'acting'. It describes how one routinely behaves within a particular context of social interaction and cultural resources. Bourdieu (1977: 72) describes *habitus* as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures', a somewhat tortuous formulation designed to break down the sociological dichotomy between structure, from which vantage point the dispositions are *structured*, and agency, from which vantage point they are *structuring*. In other words, *habitus* – here, seekership – and field – here, cultic milieu – are functionally co-constitutive: they give rise to each other. The *habitus* therefore generates the 'obvious' or 'natural' thought or act towards a circumstance or stimulus arising within the field. Certainly we have noted in primary sources an implicit 'ideology' of seekership which primes readers towards representing their repertoire of thoughts and actions as strategies for 'spiritual search'. In this qualified sense, identification as a seeker requires a measure of conscious and rational decision-making. However, the premise of a *habitus* is that subjects' beliefs and practices become 'objectively adapted to their goals *without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends* or an *express mastery* of the operations necessary to attain

them’ (Bourdieu 1977: 72; emphasis added). This suggests the inculcation of a corporeal or embodied level of action which is more than merely ‘ideology’. Emphasising the infusion of sociality and corporeality, Bourdieu goes so far as to describe a *habitus* as ‘the social, biologically individuated through incarnation into a body’ (cited in Rey 2007: 137). This difference between a set of interesting (and of course interested) ideas and what Bourdieu calls *practical* reason may create tension between attainment of the object of the quest, as promised by the ideology of seekership, and what a particular seeker’s biography might historically demonstrate. A seeker might thus express through her ‘socialised biological body’ a history of irresolution – whether interpreted as playfulness or disappointment – at the same time as defending the ideology of the quest.

Such a tension enables Possamai (2005: 21) to speak of ‘new age’ seekers in particular as ‘conflictual actors’ who experience ‘conflict with any sort of religious organisation’. For Possamai ‘conflict towards their socialisation’ rather than a required content or sequence of identification is the ‘common factor’. ‘New age’ seekers provide a prototypical instance of ‘conflict with the ecclesiastical authority’, to the extent that even when ‘educated in an alternative spiritual environment ... they still rebel against their (religious) upbringing’ (2005: 23). Possamai thus models seekership as a *habitus* which by definition incorporates desire for the ‘more’ with inherent resistance or irresolution in respect of tradition.

Bourdieu’s description of the dispositions of a *habitus* as being ‘transposable’ as well as ‘durable’ chimes with my earlier inference from Campbell, allowing us to see how the seeker’s ‘propensities to act and react in a certain way’ (Lahire, in Ray 2007: 47) may migrate into neighbouring fields of action. This functional transposability can

explain not only 'conversion careers' within religions 'new' and 'old', but may facilitate exit from the religious field altogether, as seen in identity 'projects' in de-traditionalised societies which propel historically 'religious' subjects into atheism, scepticism or hedonism. Thus seeking does not operate only within the 'religious' field, but may function within other fields in modern society: for example, in the social field, characterised by forging new networks to build social capital; within the educational field, characterised by 'upskilling' to improve one's CV; or within the economic field, characterised by serial re-training and career-hopping to maintain employability.

Campbell nicely anticipates this potential for cross-field transposability:

The basic seekership belief that truth (or enlightenment) is an esoteric commodity only to be attained after suitable preparation and a "quest" ... can apply equally well to the search for interpretations and explanations of non-religious phenomena ... and even in the context of the pursuit of worldly success, health or consolation (Campbell 1972: 124).

This concept of transposability can be sharpened if understood as a function of the 'practical reason' generated within a *habitus*, since seeking becomes less a conscious calculation than an instinctive adjustment. If the environment as a whole – made up of overlapping religious, social, economic and educational fields - is constituted by the co-existence of multiple authorities, seekership supplies to receptive practitioners a disposition adapted to the peculiar 'logic' required to negotiate this multipolar field.

There is synergy here with Giddens' concept of modern self-identity as an inescapably 'reflexive project', although Giddens emphasizes the role of a more consciously articulated instrumental rationality. As he puts it, 'a self-identity *has to be*

created and more-or-less continually reordered against the backdrop of shifting experiences of day-to-day life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions' (Giddens 1991: 185-6; emphasis added).

Whether reasoning is practical, as for Bourdieu, or cognitive, as for Giddens, the effect of engaging with a multipolar field of authorities is that all formations become relativised and de-totalised. Simultaneously the competition amongst the field's multiple authorities is reproduced in the inevitably 'conflictual' biographies of the seekers who form the field's most responsive actors. On this revised model, seekership can be conceived as a *habitus* which incorporates the competition between multiple authorities into the thinking and practices of its subjects. As such, seekership not only provides a testable model for explaining human traffic 'in and out' of new religions, but in more attenuated and diluted forms, illustrates a transposable 'practical logic' capable of operating beyond the field of religion altogether.

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¹ For example: within Spiritualist healing, Taylor (1992); in Sufism, Irwin (2011); as a route into Greek Orthodox Christianity, France (1998); as a mode of rationalist 'deconversion', Schultz (1988).

² A brand name for a popular series of books published by English Universities Press from 1938 to 1973, and from 1974 by Hodder, offering practical self-instruction in a range of topics and skills.

³ An example of practitioner 'self-falsification' is the case of a Jehovah's Witness, Sharon L. Shepard, who filed a civil rights complaint in Pennsylvania, USA, maintaining that her employer, a residential treatment centre for young women, 'forced her to attend staff meetings and voice commitment to a therapeutic model of "growth and change" in violation of her religious beliefs' which were 'predetermination, not change and growth': 'Woman sues Gannondale: "Growth and Change" against her religion', Lisa Thompson, *Erie Times-News*, Erie, PA, 21/1/14. Thanks to Beth Singler for this reference.